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AUTHOR Daresh, John C.
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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that identified the kinds of problems faced by new principals who had participated in innovative principal-preparation programs are presented in this paper. Data were collected through a series of interviews conducted with eight individuals who had assumed their first principalships during the 1991-92 school year. All had recently completed administrator-preparation programs in universities that had received curricular development support from the Danforth Foundation between 1987 and 1991. Principals reported that they encountered a similar problem during their first year--that of teachers' reactions to new leadership. The study uses Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's classic description of the stages of grief as a framework to describe such reactions. Examples of these stages--denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance--are described. Conclusions are: (1) that staff reactions are not directed personally toward the new principals; (2) that new principals should learn about their predecessors' leadership styles; and (3) that teachers often rely on their principals' subtle signals to guide their personal behaviors. (Contains 6 references.) (LMI)

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THE ARRIVAL OF THE NEW PRINCIPAL:

REACTIONS OF STAFF

by

John C. Daresh
Professor and Director
Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, Colorado 80639
(303) 351-1645

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THE ARRIVAL OF THE NEW PRINCIPAL:
REACTIONS OF STAFF

In recent years, increasing attention by both researchers and practitioners has been directed toward the importance of learning more about the kinds of issues that are part of the transition of individuals into principalships for the first time. Among the recent analyses of the ways in which individuals have come "on board" in their first administrative roles, work by Hart (1993), Parkay and Hall (1991), Weindling and Earley (1987), Daresh (1986), and Duke and his Associates (1984) have served as examples of an emerging scholarly interest in the ways in which people become school principals. These studies have found remarkably similar issues of interest to beginning school building leaders. First, they have suggested that novice principals experience a profound sense of isolation from peers as they move into their roles. Second, they often lack confidence, even when they possess great competence to do their jobs. Finally, they typically describe their new roles as times filled with anxiety, frustration, and self-doubt.

Another characteristic common of most recent studies of the transition into the principalship is that, with the notable exception of Hart's (1993) comprehensive review of critical issues, most research focuses almost exclusively on the ways in which the new role of principal effects the role incumbent. Most investigations have tended to ignore the impact that the

arrival of a new school leader has had on what goes on within a school. This has included the impact that a new principal has had on the teaching staff of a school.

The purpose of the study described in this paper was to examine the ways in which the arrival of a new elementary school principal had an effect on the teachers who worked in their schools.

Methodology

This study was first designed as an effort to determine the kinds of problems that were faced by principals during their first years of service after having participated in innovative principal preparation programs. The nature of innovativeness in each of these programs was defined in terms of making extensive use of such practices as deliberate efforts to promote greater reflection on the part of aspiring administrators, experiential learning, and reliance on mentoring relationships as part of preservice formation.

The data collection procedures utilized consisted of conducting a series of interviews of eight individuals who assumed their first principalships during the 1991-92 school year. All had recently completed administrator preparation programs in universities which had received support for curricular development from the Danforth Foundation at some point between 1987 and 1991. Three interviews were first scheduled with the target group of administrators during their first year, and another round of three interviews were initially scheduled during the principals' second year. Data collection related to the primary focus of the study--

issues faced by the principals--continues now during the 1992-93 school year.

Early in the first year of the study, it was recognized that an issue addressed by each of the eight respondents was the feeling that they were unprepared for the type of reactions that they received from their teaching staffs. As new leaders of their schools, they quickly sensed that their presence was having a major effect on the internal environments of their organizations, particularly in terms of the attitudes and behaviors of their teaching staffs. This issue was such a common observation of all eight principals that it was decided that it would be a worthwhile and researchable enough topic that additional questions should be directed during the first year to determine more about the exact nature of teachers' reactions to new principals.

As the first year of data collection proceeded, the researcher asked for additional examples of the ways in which teachers demonstrated their reactions to the new principals. As interview data were reviewed, it became clear that the new administrators were describing behaviors in almost parallel terms to the stages of grief described by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) in her work, On Death and Dying. The remainder of this paper presents the interview data in terms of Kubler-Ross's descriptive framework, and also considers some implications for the preservice preparation of school principals so that they would be better able to deal with this kind of "trauma" when it presents itself in their first school assignment.

First Stage: Denial and Isolation

Kubler-Ross noted that, when the majority of patients who first learn of the fact that they had a terminal illness, their typical reaction was one of initial denial, typically followed by efforts to shut out any contact from outsiders. An often-heard phrase by patients in this situation was something like, "But it can't be me."

As first year principals in this study were asked about their initial reactions to their new jobs, one thing that was repeated by nearly every respondent was the fact that they were surprised to note that their teaching staffs often acted as if the previous principals were still working in their buildings. As one of the beginners noted,

> It was the third week of the school year, and I realized that people were kind of looking right through me when they saw me in the principal's office...kind of like they were kids in a class looking past the substitute teacher in anticipation of the regular teacher coming back to work in a day or two...

Other manifestations of the fact that the former principal was still alive and working in the building were found in many other comments and observations. One of the most common observations was the fact that teachers universally made reference to "the way Mr. X" used to do it, or "Mrs. Y's way" of handling everything from routine discipline problems to classroom observations, to leading faculty meetings. The interesting thing to note about this is that, in many cases, the teachers did not necessarily like or respect the former principal. Quite the contrary. In at least half the cases, the former principal appeared to be an individual who did not enjoy much support from the teaching staff. Nevertheless, his/her

departure appeared to be something with which the teaching staff was not comfortable. The pain of losing someone familiar seemed to be something more terrible than having to continue to endure someone who was not viewed favorably.

Second Stage: Anger

The next reaction described by most of the new principals involved a sense that their teachers were somehow angry that a new person had "invaded their turf." If there was not open rebellion against the new leader, there was at least some degree of discernible tension between the teachers and principal after the initial sense of denial had passed:

> I remember one staff meeting that I had about a month after we began the school year. Maybe I'm too sensitive, but all I can remember is walking into the room--in front of my own teaching staff--and looking into the eyes of strangers. They really didn't like me, or they were made, or something was wrong... I felt really uncomfortable and that staff meeting lasted only half as long as most other sessions.

In Kubler-Ross's framework, this stage is described by patients looking around and wondering why they have the misfortune of contracting a terrible and terminal illness: "Why didn't this happen to X?" Like the first stage of denial, this reaction is predictable and generally viewed as a normal and healthy response to an undesirable end state. This finding is also consistent with Hart's (1993) description of a faculty's perspective of leader succession. She noted that a typical reaction to the arrival of a new principal is often "disenchantment and distress" on the part of the faculty.

It should be noted that the kind of anger described here did not appear to erupt into any type of open warfare or rebellion by the teaching

staff. To the contrary, anger in this sense was always a quiet, understated type of resentment that appeared to be expressed mostly through non-verbal behaviors. Teachers are generally careful to cover any sense of open confrontation with other adults, particularly in cases where the other adults are viewed as superordinates in the organizational structure.

A second common characteristics of this stage was that it appeared to be relatively short-lived, at least in the cases of most of the principals in this study. The remarkable thing about this fact, however, was that the duration of faculty anger again appeared to be wholly unconnected from their perceptions of the previous principal: Anger was short-lived in cases where the faculty liked or disliked the preceding principal.

Third Stage: Bargaining

Kubler-Ross describes a relatively short period of time wherein terminally ill patients discover that they cannot deny their illness, and that anger does not good. As a result, they try to "bargain" in the sense that, if they are "good," they will be allowed to return to an earlier state in which they were not ill:

> The terminally ill patient...knows...that there is a slim chance that he may be rewarded for good behavior and be granted a wish for special services. His wish is most always an extension of life, followed by the wish for a few days without pain... A patient who was an opera singer, with a distorting malignancy of her jaw and face who could no longer perform on the stage, asked "to perform just one more time." When she became aware that this was impossible, she gave the most touching performance perhaps of her lifetime. She asked to come to the seminar and to speak in front of the audience, not behind a one-way mirror. She unfolded her life story, her success, and her tragedy in front of the class until a telephone call summoned her to return to her room. Doctor and dentist were ready to pull all her teeth in order to proceed with the radiation treatment. She had asked to sing

once more--to us--before she had to hide her face forever. (Kubler-Ross, 1969, pp. 82-83)/

The trauma faced by the typical school teaching staff after it loses a principal is certainly not to be confused with this touching story of "one last chance" by a terminally ill opera singer. However, there are some similarities between this study and the kinds of behaviors witnessed by beginning principals. A typical reaction identified by all eight principals in this study was that, after some expressions of anger directed toward them, they felt that there was a clear period of "backing off" from this type of hostility toward the new principal. It was almost like the games played by youngster who wish to avoid punishment by "being good if you just let me..." As was true of the anger stage, this phase tended to be one that did not last very long, normally concluding with the winter break.

Fourth Stage: Depression

This stage is difficult to identify as to whether it is one related to the new principal, as contrasted with being a normal and ordinary part of each school year in every school for nearly every teacher--regardless of whether the principal was new or not. In the cases of this study, this period of depression tended to come in the first few weeks after the winter break, in January and early February. Thus, it was not easy to detect if this was truly a stage related to the staff acceptance of a new principal, or if it was simply the traditional period of "mid-winter blahs" that tend to be experienced by all teaching staffs in nearly all schools.

Kubler-Ross's description of this stage is one that may be used for

considering the precise nature of staff depression:

> When the terminally ill patient can no longer deny his illness, when he is forced to undergo more surgery or hospitalization, when he begins to have more symptoms or becomes weaker or thinner, he cannot smile it off anymore. His numbness or stoicism, his anger or rage will soon be replaced with a great sense of loss. (p. 85)

The same resignation to the undeniable truth that there is, indeed, a new principal comes eventually to a teaching staff. All the denial, anger, or bargaining will not change the fact that the former principal has gone and that the new person is, in fact, here to stay. With one exception, this realization by staff led to a general sense of depression that was, as noted earlier, connected directly to the annual phenomenon of feeling that the school year seemed to drag on and on. In one case where this depression was not readily apparent, a knowledge of the individual school's recent history was a possible explanation for why anger was the prevailing emotion still demonstrated by many staff members. In that case, the school had served as a kind of "training ground" for every newly hired principal in the district for several years. When the current principal (a recent recipient of a Ph.D.) was hired, the continuing staff perception was that she would be there for one or two years at most, before being moved to a larger and more prestigious school in the district. Even though the principal's eventual move was not viewed by the staff as her own choice, she was still viewed as a "short-timer" and the staff seemed to be preparing for yet another feeling of loss of its leader in the next year or two. As a result, anger rather depression, seemed to be the mood under the surface in this one site.

Fifth Stage: Acceptance

Toward the end of the first year of data collection, the researcher received an unexpected call from one of the eight principals who reported,

> Something amazing has been happening during the last few weeks...They [the teachers] seem to, all of a sudden, like me. You know, it's really amazing, but it's like a wall suddenly fell and we're getting along a lot better. I don't think I did anything to change their attitudes, but I know things are better. For the first time, I'm really looking forward to next year with this staff...

Kubler-Ross refers to this as a period of "quiet acceptance" of the inevitable outcome of the illness. In this review of staff attitudes regarding a new principal, this appears to the time in the school year (sometime around the spring break) when the teachers suddenly realize that they have "survived" the trauma of a rookie principal, and that life was not as bad as they had expected last September. The new principal was suddenly their principal, like it or not. But even in one or two cases where there did not appear to be strong mutual respect developed between principal and staff, there was a recognition and realization that the "marriage" between teachers and principal was not going to be annulled. In September, this principal would be back and so would they. Strangely enough, this recognition and acceptance even appeared to take place in the one school where teachers felt that they were forced to work so often with the newest principal in the district. They appeared to know that they would eventually get the "next new kid," but for the time being, they would have the same administrator for at least one more year.

Implications for Preservice Programs

The observations described in this paper have a number of implications for the preservice preparation of individuals prior to taking their first principalships. Perhaps the most important is the fact that those preparing for their first administrative posts would be well-advised that much of what they are likely to experience in terms of staff reactions to their work will not necessarily be directed personally toward them. The principals included in this study may or may not all have very successful careers as school leaders. Some may be viewed as very effective in the future, while some may have problems. The eight individuals certainly demonstrated very different personalities, and in all probability, they represented eight very different styles of leadership and interaction patterns with their teachers. Some had many years of teaching experience, while some had only a few years of experience. None of these variables seemed to matter. All faced the same kind of general reactions of their staff throughout the first year of the principalship. Based on different personalities, the reactions of the principals to the same behaviors of staff differed, of course. Some tended to internalize and personalize the "signals" they felt were coming from teachers. Others tended to dismiss behaviors by teachers as the "fault" of the teachers. The critical issue to be shared with aspiring administrators is that they will likely experience many, if not all, of the stages described earlier in this paper.

Another implication for preservice preparation might be that those going into their first principalship might realize that they will likely be

deluged with comparisons between their leadership style and the style of their predecessors. As a result, it may be important for beginners to learn how to read the signals of past performance that they find in their buildings when they first move. After all, the results of this study suggest that new principals will be viewed suspiciously as the people who now inhabit "Mr./Mrs. X's" office for a number of weeks at the beginning of the school year. Consequently, they should learn more about the nature of "Mr./Mrs. X" so that they can predict sources of discontent that may arise. One situation that was described by one of the principals in this study concerned the fact that, upon entering her office for the first time, she discovered the former principal's book case filled with pamphlets describing effective discipline techniques, and an office still containing three "time out carrels" which the former used to supervise right in his office. This five second tour could have provided her with a wealth of information regarding the staff's likely perception of what a "perfect" (or at least the former) principal was. If the new principal did not wish to be viewed solely as a student disciplinarian, she had to realize that there was going to be a period of time when the staff still expected her to work with their "bad boys and girls." Her different view of what principals do would take time to share with staff. On the other hand, if this first year principal had tried to curry favor with the teachers by replicating the former principal's style, she probably would have been very unsuccessful because she would have denied the reality that staff need a period of time to grieve the loss of their former leader.

Perhaps the most important issue that this study points to is the fact that those aspiring to school principalships might remember that teaching staffs have a pattern of behavior that is often similar to the behavior of some of the pupils in a school. They are frequently very dependent upon the subtle signals shown by the principal to guide their personal behavior. The new principal should not be surprised to discover that many teachers seek signs of approval from the principal, and when the principal changes, whole new patterns of behavior on the part of teachers must be discovered. Again, the critical issue to recall is that when the stages of grief described in this paper begin to emerge during the first year of one's administrative career, it would be wrong to assume that these are unique to one person's leadership style.

Summary

In this paper, a recent study of problems faced by beginning principals was described. As eight first year principals presented issues that they faced, it was quickly recognized that one of the issues faced by every respondent was the kinds of reactions shown by teachers to new leadership. It was also recognized that an appropriate framework to describe these reactions could be found in the classic description of stages of grief provided by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Examples of staff behaviors in the schools of first year principals were presented according to this framework.

The data collection for this study is not yet completed in the sense that the original research was designed to identify issues faced in common

by individuals during their first two years of administrative service. To date, the issues faced relative to staff reactions of beginning principals have not reappeared during the second year on the job. If there are some walls that are found between novice administrators and their staffs, at least these walls do not appear to be so high as to prevent eventual reconciliation.

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